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ABSTRACT

University English departments are failing because of unclear goals concerning writing programs, an entrenchment of literature in the departments, and the hiring of untrained writing teachers. Many writing positions are nontenure track, require instructors to teach four sections of freshman composition, or require a Ph.D. in some aspect of literature with a commitment to teach composition on the side. Teachers whose field is literature are prone to use literary models for writing, which is pedagogically sound, but often the course turns into an analysis of the model and away from the process of writing. This emphasis on product also leads teachers to ignore invention and writing as an act of discovering what one wants to say. Nonspecialists also tend to ignore the purpose of the discourse and the intended audience and to reward writing that is abstract and opaque, while at the same time focusing on mechanics at the expense of organization and coherence. Until English departments do begin to seek a balance between writing and literature at the undergraduate level, and until they begin hiring writing specialists, they will remain vulnerable to criticism. (HTH)

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# THE FAILURE OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS

by

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University English departments are failing! They are failing because, for the most part, they are ignoring the needs of undergraduates and the needs of the community. This failure stems from myopia: too few universities have clarified their goals concerning writing programs, and fewer still have unified their writing programs. This narrowness of vision derives from the entrenchment of literature in the English department, and from the hiring of untrained writing teachers.

No doubt, writing programs are more visible than they were ten years ago, and no doubt, more writing teachers are being trained. But, we will have to do much more in the 1980s if we hope to achieve the type of literacy that we so often talk about.

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Until English departments do begin to seek a balance between writing and literature at the undergraduate level--and until they begin hiring writing specialists, they will remain vulnerable to criticism. I'm not advocating an end to literary studies. Far from it. I'm advocating a more balanced English curriculum.

Recently, Lynn Troyka was quoted as saying that "composition used to be the poor relation of the English department . . . . Now, it's almost a status field, and you see that in the way the textbook market is growing."[1] The textbook market is booming. But does a booming textbook market equate with status in the field and improved writing programs? The evidence says otherwise.

Our English departments' failures to hire trained writing personnel are obvious in the schizophrenic job listings in the MLA Job Information List (JIL). Consider some of the recent listings. If the teaching of writing has become such a status field, why is it that so many writing jobs are at the instructor's level? Why is it that so many are non-tenure track positions? Why is it that so many require teaching four sections of Freshman composition? Why is it that so many English departments will hire M.A.'s to teach writing?

Here are some typical job listings:

-----Instructorship in English. Appointment is for one year and involves teaching four sections of Freshman writing each semester.

-----Candidate needed in Contemporary Literature, with special training and experience in composition and rhetoric desirable. Position involves primarily the teaching of freshman composition and sophomore surveys.

-----Ph.D. in American Literature to teach freshman composition and intro. to lit; also significant experience in technical writing required.

And, of course, we have the many listings which require a Ph.D. in Romantic Literature, Modern Literature, or whatever, and add that these teachers must have a firm commitment to the teaching of writing. As though these English departments don't know: all candidates have a firm commitment to the teaching of writing these days--at least until they get the job.

I'm not so much concerned with the status we have as writing teachers as I am with the lack of status that writing itself has in English departments and other departments as well.

A good deal has been written about the need to improve

freshman composition and writing programs in general. And I'm sure that many of you can point to a number of excellent writing programs: if not at the college or university where you teach, at the University of Iowa, or Michigan, or California, or somewhere. Similarly, you can point to the Bay Area Writing Program, programs that have followed the Bay Area model, and other successful writing programs.

But those programs are exceptions. And, in some cases, even the exceptions are flawed. In fact, many who point with pride to their writing programs have TA's teaching almost all of the freshman composition sections. That is not always bad, especially when the TA's are in graduate writing programs, but that is not often the case. Similarly, we all know someone who has made a successful transition from literature to writing. Many of us have made that transition.

Overall, though, we have a lot left to do before good writing programs become established in most English departments. And we will continue to fail, and we will be plagued with weak or non-existent programs until English departments stop hiring people who have written dissertations on the finger imagery in The Duchess of Malfi to teach courses in writing. No self-respecting English department would think of hiring someone with expertise in rhetoric, technical writing, business

writing, or advanced composition to teach American Literature. Yet, as issue after issue of the JIL indicates, too many English departments still have no qualms about hiring a Ph.D. in literature to teach writing courses.

The argument that someone with a background in literature can walk into a writing class and do a good job is outright nonsense. Until English departments recognize this fact, they will continue to make a haphazard stab at teaching writing.

The problems which often result from hiring non-specialists to teach writing are many. Let me review some of them:

1. Teachers whose field is literature are prone to use literary models for writing. The use of models is pedagogically sound; the tradition dates back to Aristotle. Too often, though, the writing course turns to analysis of the model, and turns away from the process of writing. The literary text creates an occasion for discussions about life. But as so many rhetoricians have pointed out, analysis of the product of writing has little relation to the writing process. As a result of their training, teachers of literature are product-oriented.

2. Emphasis on product also leads these teachers to ignore invention and writing as an act of discovering what one wants to say. For as Peter Elbow argues, "Control, coherence, and knowing your mind are not what you start out with but what you end up

with . . . . Writing is a way of ending up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking."[2]

3. Along with a lack of focus on invention and writing as discovery, non-specialists tend to ignore the purpose of the discourse and the intended audience.

4. In addition to ignoring our rhetorical tradition, non-specialists tend to reward those students whose writing is abstract and opaque. In fact, while chairing a high school English department, and later, while supervising student interns in English, I found that English teachers often down-grade papers written in plain English. Their reasons for doing so are revealing: They don't believe that enough thought has gone into the paper. These teachers expect their students to write the same turgid prose that they were nurtured on.

5. Teachers without rhetorical training are vigilant in their condemnation of run-on sentences and comma splices, but say little about organization and coherence.

6. And, teachers without any foundation in rhetoric often-times sound as though they have just discovered the wheel when they begin talking and writing about such topics as invention, prose readability, style, and the like. They know Aristotle's Poetics, but not his Rhetoric. When Campbell is mentioned, they think soup--not rhetorician.

7. Because college and university English departments place too much emphasis on literature--and so little on writing

programs, high school English teachers do not have the training in writing that they need. It's still rare to find new English teachers who have taken more than one linguistics or advanced writing course. And we have all read about English teachers from Florida to Idaho who have failed district literacy tests. Since roughly 20 percent of our English majors become teachers, we are doing them and the community a disservice by not giving them the necessary skills.

What about the other 80 percent who graduate with degrees in English? What happens to them? Enrollments have dropped drastically in English over the last eight years because too many English departments have, for the most part, chosen to ignore student needs. Some English departments, as I noted earlier, have created excellent undergraduate writing programs. But they are the exceptions.

How often do we have to read comments such as: "The work-a-day writing that concerns most Americans and the writing that concerns English professors in their English classroom are worlds apart,"[3] before we begin to realize that we have to change our outlook--or go the way of the dinosaur.

Consider the Writer's Market. Out of 511 pages, only 8 pages deal with the kind of writing most often taught in

literature classes. And the Document Design Center in Washington, D.C. is developing "an undergraduate writing curriculum for organizational settings." Why is it that just about everyone outside of English departments recognizes the need for strong writing programs?

In 1977, in a College English interview, Daniel Dieterich argued that we must demand that the writing staff of college English departments know how to teach writing.[4] After five years we are not much closer to that goal. The only commitment to writing that many English departments have made is to require a strong commitment to writing from the people they hire. That is quite an academic credential: a strong commitment.

In effect, too many English departments are still so entrenched in their pursuit of some greater glory that their commitment to writing programs is as strong as President Reagan's commitment to the poor and to nuclear disarmament.

We need balanced programs in English because English should be the heart of liberal education. Integrated writing programs would give our majors the type of education envisioned by John Henry Cardinal Newman in The Idea of a University:
"It is [an] education which gives a man a clear conscious view

of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility."[5] That is the vision that I would like to see us carry into the 1980s.

ENDNOTES

[1]Karen J. Winkler, "Composition Textbooks," The Chronicle of Higher Education, Nov. 18, 1981, p. 27.

[2]Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 15.

[3]Robbins Burling, "An Anthropological Glimpse of the English Teacher's World," College English, Sept. 1977, p. 24.

[4]Daniel J. Dietrich, "The Decline in Students' Writing Skills: An ERIC/RCS Interview," College English, Jan. 1977, pp. 466-472.

[5]John Henry Cardinal Newman, "The Idea of a University," The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 3rd ed., Vol II, M.H. Abrams, General Editor (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1974), p. 1571.